

Chapter 9

Life and Death in the Bronze Age of the NW of Iberian Peninsula

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ABSTRACT This paper examines funerary practices and contexts in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula during the Bronze Age in order to chart the different responses to death. These practices, understood as “social metaphors”, will serve as a basis for our interpretation of the different ways in which societies engage with the environment. The burial sites and associated rites are also analyzed as forms of legitimization and territorial possession, which function through the creation of “a sense of place”, able thereafter to transmit memory and contribute to the construction of the group identity.

All societies have procedures and rules for dealing with death. Funerary rites may therefore be seen as communication systems, which tell us much more about the living than about the dead (Thomas 1999) and which may be interpreted as social acts or as metaphors of the society. Death is a social act, and funerary practices are “symbolic productions”, in the sense intended by P. Bourdieu (1989), designed to help explain the relationship between the living and the dead (Barret 1994). They transmit memory, contribute to the construction of identity and foster social bonds, while legitimizing the possession of the territories where they occur.

Starting with these premises, we have analyzed the funerary contexts and practices of the NW of the Iberian Peninsula during the Bronze Age (i.e. over 1500 years) in terms of the mechanisms of memory and identity transmission (fig.1). However, it should be remembered that the discourse of death does not reflect society as a whole; it is merely one dimension, to be related to other discourses. Consequently, the interpretations made should be considered as fragments of a complex multifaceted reality.

The Data

Contrary to what is normally suggested in the international bibliography, the data on funerary contexts for the NW of the Iberian Peninsula are significant in volume, although rather uneven in character. In addition to older discoveries, which are sometimes problematic with regard to the information they impart, the last 20 years have seen the development of many new research projects and field surveys, thus bringing to light fresh information and enabling the radiocarbon dating of more sealed contexts (Bettencourt forthcoming a and b). Using this body of data, we have traced out a provisional interpretative sequence, which of course is open to discussion. We have not made use of traditional

periodization. Using the facts available today for the Northwest, we consider the beginnings of the Early Bronze Age to be between 2300 and 2200 BC and the division between the Early and Middle Bronze Age to be 18th and 17th centuries BC. Similarly, the beginnings of the Later Bronze Age are not well defined, despite the substantial body of available data that suggest the end of the 2nd millennium BC as a possible starting date. Its terminus is also problematic and probably occurred at different times between coast and hinterland; nevertheless, we could consider that it ends between the 7th and 6th centuries BC, the moment when changes took place that propelled these communities towards the Iron Age.

Between the end of the 3rd millennium and the end of the 2nd, it seems to have been relatively common for small or medium-sized monuments to have been built on *tumuli*, in stone and earth, sometimes with stone chambers or in a pit, and showing influences of megalithic technological processes (fig.2).

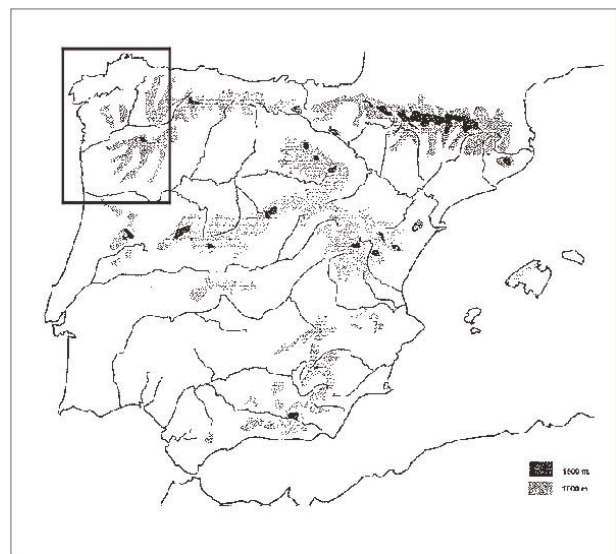


Fig. 1. Map of the Iberian Peninsula, showing the location of the northwest.



Fig. 2. Early Bronze Age tomb in the megalithic tradition: Outeiro de Gregos 1, Baião - Oporto (Early Bronze Age) (according to O. Jorge 1980).

They were usually built inside or on the edge of large megalithic necropolises, upon territory that had been sacred since the Neolithic. There is also evidence of the ritualistic manipulation of megalithic monuments. There are many examples of large dolmens where Bronze Age metal ornaments and ceramic vessels were deposited.

Some barrows, bounded by boulders and with a small central chamber and erected on sacred ancestral land, can also be included in the beginning of the Early Bronze Age. These are tombs without *tumuli*, with the funeral chambers constructed inside oval enclosures demarcated by natural or displaced outcrops, and their diachrony is yet unknown.

Within these traditions, there are places that appear to have become consecrated *ex nihilo* in the Early Bronze Age, generally occupying territories that were connected, directly or indirectly, to agricultural lands and sometimes located near to residential areas. This is the case of numerous necropolises of cist graves, common in the north of Portugal and Galicia, in which only one tomb contains metal, lithic and ceramic remains, such as Chedeiro (Cualedro, Ourense, Spain), Agra da Ínsua (Carnota, A Coruña, Spain), Quinta de Água Branca (Vila Nova de Cerveira, Viana do Castelo, Portugal), etc. (Fortes 1906; Luengo y Martinez 1965; Taboada Chivite 1971; Bettencourt forthcoming b).

This is also the case of tombs 1 and 2 of Vale Ferreiro (Fafe, Braga, Portugal). The first, which can be



Fig. 3.1. Tomb 2 at Vale Ferreiro, Fafe – Braga.



Fig. 3.2. Deposit from tomb 2 at Vale Ferreiro.

radiocarbon dated to the transition from 3th to 2nd millennia BC, is architecturally within the megalithic tradition, with a cist-shaped chamber and cairn, but was built inside a pit completely underground. The second, which is also subterranean, presumably covered with wood, contained two gold spirals, amongst other remains that can be dated to this period (Bettencourt *et al.* 2002; 2005) (figs. 3.1 and 3.2).

Surprisingly, recent research has shown that these places also remained symbolically active until the Late Bronze Age. Here, between the 18th and 15th centuries BC, a double pit was dug out, (grave? cult deposit?), and between the 13th and 10th centuries BC, a kind of “tomb house” was constructed. Thus, it is probable that other circular and oval-shaped pit structures, sometimes covered with gravel, could be tombs constructed throughout the Bronze Age. This hypothesis is supported by the existence of burial pits at Fraga do Zorro (Galicia, Spain) dated between the 19th and 17th centuries BC (Fábregas Valcarce 2001). The same seems to have happened in other sites in Galicia, where there is evidence of different types of burials and rites, such as Devesa de Abaixo, Pontevedra, Spain), lasting until the beginning of the first millennium BC (Vázquez Liz 2005).



Fig. 4. Aerial view of flat graves from the necropolis at Cimalha, adjacent to the settlement (Felgueiras – Oporto) (according to Pedro Pedro Almeida & Francisco Fernandes forthcoming, adapted).

New contexts and funerary practices also started to appear during the Middle Bronze Age, partially overlapping with these scenarios. These are inhumation cemeteries, located in the vicinity of or inside residential areas. These new sites differ from the previous ones in that the architecture of the tombs is much more uniform (only cists or flat tombs) and there is greater standardization in the deposited artifacts (generally one or more pottery vessels of similar shape). Some of these contexts seem to have lasted throughout the first millennium BC, i.e. during what is surely the regional Late Bronze Age.

A good example is the case of Tapado da Caldeira (Baião, Oporto, Portugal), close to the settlement of Bouça do Frade, lasting until the end of the second millennium BC. Here, along with the sub-rectangular flat-bottomed grave, cut out of the sandy clay between the 17th to 15th centuries BC, several different indications of worship were found (pits, with or without deposits, accumulation of ashes and coals), as well as a fireplace, built there between the 14th and 11th centuries BC (Jorge 1980; 1983). Another good example of the same sort of phenomena having occurred, the lack of corroborative radiocarbon dating, is Cimalha (Felgueiras, Oporto, Portugal), where a large necropolis of 163 flat graves dug in the sandy clay (fig. 4) (Almeida & Fernandes

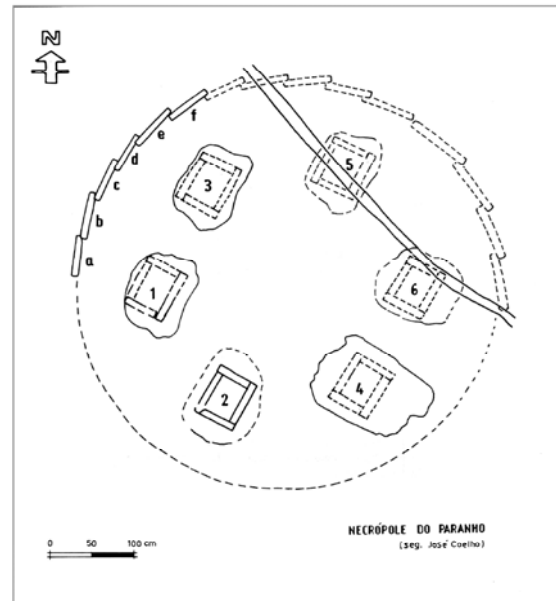


Fig. 5.1. Cremation necropolis at Paranho (Tondela - Viesu) (according to D. Cruz, 1997).

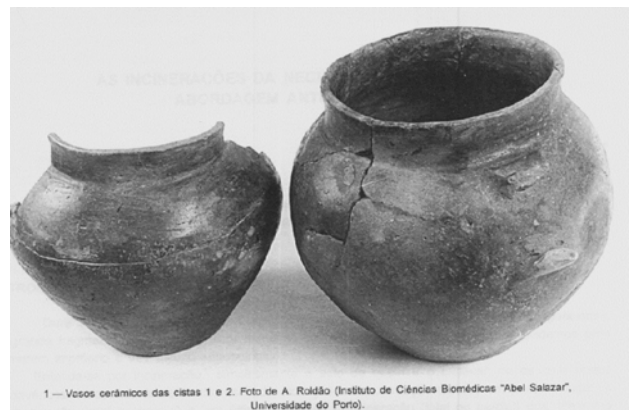


Fig. 5.2. Cremation vessels at Paranho (Tondela) (Late Bronze Age) (according to D. J. Cruz, 1997).

forthcoming) was apparently organized in stratigraphic sequence from the Middle to Middle/Late Bronze Age (Bettencourt forthcoming).

Finally, in the transition between the 2nd and 1st millennia BC and throughout the first part of the 1st, in the Later Bronze Age, funerary structures are more difficult to detect. However, the available data indicate a large diversity of practices (Bettencourt forthcoming a).

The symbolic appropriation of ancestral megalithic monuments was still taking place as regards other burial sites connected to ancestral territories, particularly in mountain areas. These were now distinguished by indications of funeral practices involving partial cremation (figs. 5.1 and 5.2) or with secondary deposits inside or in the vicinity of the ceremonial areas such as *Chao San Martin* (Astúrias, Spain) (Villa Valdés & Cabo Pérez 2003).

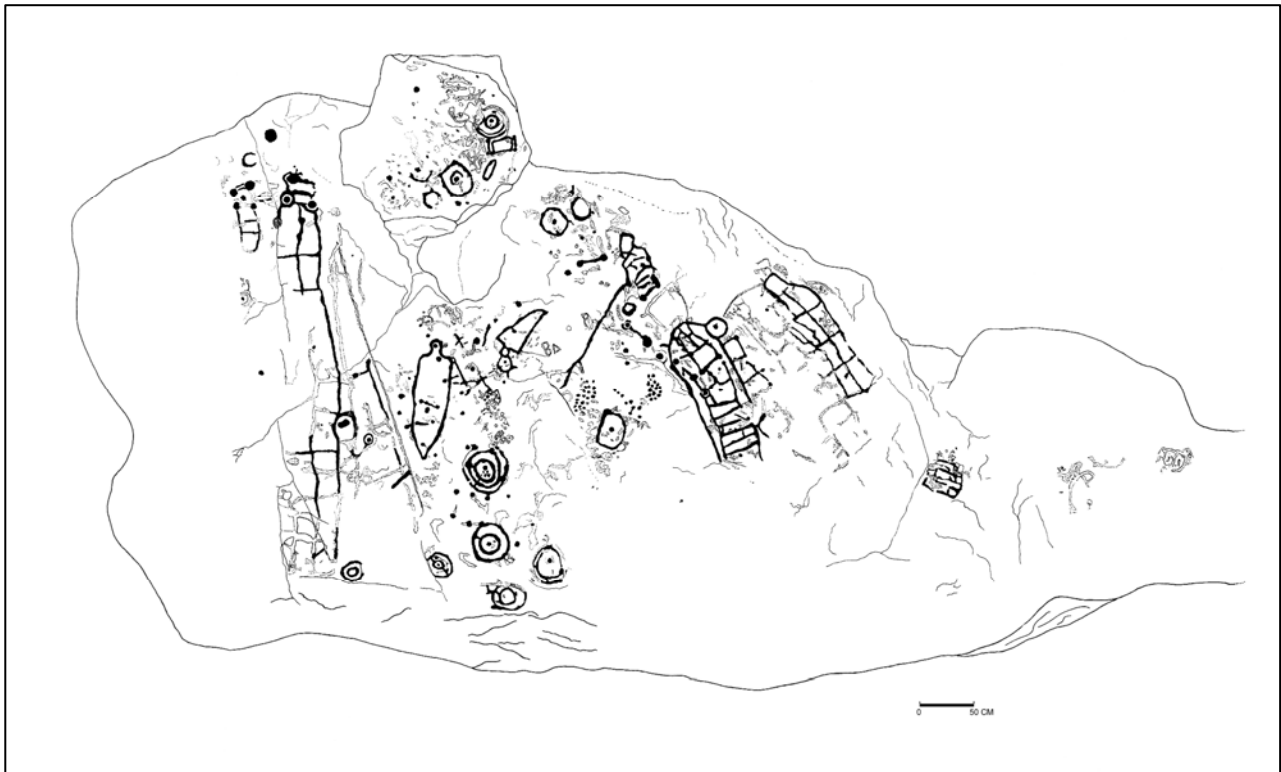


Fig. 6. Rock sanctuary at Monte da Laje with representations of daggers from the Bronze Age (according to E. J. Silva & A. M. L. Cunha 1986).

Discussion

Having briefly described the main characteristics of the Bronze Age tombs and funeral practices in northwest Iberia, I will now try to give an overview of how material evidence related to death can be interpreted as sites and tools of communication, and how these reinforced the social bonds of the communities that built and used them.

Throughout the entirety of the Bronze Age, and particularly during the Early and Middle periods, there is clear evidence of the symbolic appropriation of ancestral landscapes in the high lands and, simultaneously, the creation of sites *ex nihilo*, in the low lands.

In the mountainous areas burials and other rites performed inside funeral chambers or in the *tumuli* of former megalithic monuments demonstrate how these were appropriated and used symbolically, thus becoming a means by which the new emerging power legitimated itself principally during the Early Bronze Age where metal ornaments are usually found. Through commemoration ceremonies that could be cyclical or exceptional, communities would have visited the tombs of the ancestors, recreating or interpreting events from the past, thus demonstrating the ideological importance of history and their gallery of mythical and ancestral personages. As P. Bourdieu (1989) says, historical legacies are reified and incorporated in the service of a new ideological and social order. In the same way, the various types of monuments built in the Bronze Age,

inside or on the edge of large megalithic necropolises, could be interpreted as ways of keeping the traditional scenarios active, by endowing them with new significances and enabling new memories to be created around the site.

In the lowlands the new locations of representation and new types of construction (cists, flat graves and pits) seem in many cases to reflect a distancing in relation to the territories of the old ancestors, as well as an affirmation of new ideological conceptions. To support this hypothesis we can say that in almost every necropolis of the Early Bronze Age there is only one physical corpse buried with exceptional metal and lithic remains, probably the new ancestor that legitimates the occupation of the new land occupied by each community. Some of these new scenarios, such as Vale Ferreiro and probably Devesa de Abaixo and some of the people buried there, at the start of the Bronze Age, may have remained symbolically powerful for a long time, sometimes up to the Late Bronze Age. Thus, some of the human bodies (those whose peculiar tombs or special deposits conferred great social power) may be considered to be essential for the social process of legitimating the possession of new occupied territories by certain groups. At the same time, these places are likely to have undergone a process of mythification during the course of the Bronze Age by means of the different processes for the transmission of social memory: the inscribed or embodied memory (Connerton 1989). This interpretation accounts for the fact that around these primitive tombs actions were performed, cult objects deposited and new burials took

place. These burials were very simple in construction terms, with offerings of perishable materials, seeds or simple ceramic containers, normally roughly-hewn. Thus, gradually, they became special places that performed broader social and ideological functions. That is, they would function as memorials, thereby allowing the communities to develop historical and emotional ties to the environment, i.e. *“the experience of place”*, in the sense of C. Tilley (1994) and J. Thomas (1996). According to the latter author, *“...a deeper understanding of the landscape comes not from observing the land and hearing stories about it, but from inhabiting it in the course of everyday life”*.

In general terms, the new mortuary contexts of the Early and Middle Bronze Ages were now situated lower down, fully visible or in agricultural fields and well irrigated valleys, following the strategy of location near residential areas. Indeed, this tendency is also noted in the distribution of open-air Atlantic rock art sanctuaries in Galicia and Portugal (Bradley 2002) and since the Middle Bronze Age, in the votive metal hoards (Bettencourt 2000). The same metallic weapons that are deposited in the tombs of the Early Bronze Age are sometimes represented in the rock art revealing the symbolic appropriation of different landscapes through human actions concerned both with the world of the living and the world of the dead (fig. 6). Thus, during the Early and Middle Bronze Ages, scenarios of power seem to have moved away from the old sacred territories (except in some mountainous areas), with meanings now expressed through a greater variety of scenes and manifestations. In all these places, the different magical-symbolic prohibitions and rites would have functioned as mechanisms for the transmission of memory and generation of the collective identity in the service of the new system of land management and maintenance of the newly established order. Whatever social mechanisms might have led to the break up of the ancestral traditions and establishment of a new order (such as increased openness of the communities to the outside world; more interaction between different regional groups; the colonization of new territories motivated by technical advances and by the search for mineral deposits in a phase of “invention” or discovery of new magical/symbolic practices), it is likely that new

ideological and identity dynamics were gradually affirmed as part of the process of bolstering the new powers in a logic of change in continuity.

As the Middle Bronze Age advanced, the tendency to locate the necropolises in areas adjoining the residential sites or inside them and the “simplicity” of offered artifacts may indicate that death was gradually being integrated into the cycle of daily life (Bradley 2000) and being “tamed”, therefore losing its importance as a referent of social memory. This appears to be more evident in the Late Bronze Age when cremation was gradually implemented, suggesting the loss of importance of the physical body.

What was this transformation due to? Along with J. Barret (1994), I believe that the loss of importance of the ancestor cult, embedded in the megalithic monuments, will reveal the emergence of a new conception of space,

according to which the individual or the world of the living is preponderant. There seems to be evidence of the legitimization of territory, in the large number of metal hoards, in residential areas and in the rites and performances carried out by the living, manipulating new symbols, including a wide range of metal and ceramic objects, and other luxury artifacts. However, it is also possible that after the body had been destroyed, the memory and power of some actors was preserved in statue-menhirs, common in the northwest, which bear representations of weapons, and other symbols that are difficult to interpret (fig. 7).

To conclude, I would like to point out that, given the characteristics of the data and the embryonic nature of the study into the funerary practices in northwest Iberia, these interpretations should be considered essentially as working hypotheses. They could, perhaps, be used to orient further research projects within a perspective that is simultaneously phenomenological and semiological, and in which the landscape is considered not only

from an economic perspective but also valued as a place of experience about the world, a site of signification *“in which the sacred and profane, symbolic and practical were intimately interwoven”* (Hill 1993), and where settlements, rock art, metal hoards and burials are not dealt with as separate fixed entities but as dimensions of a whole pattern of social experience.



Fig. 7. Statue – Menhir of Muiño de San Pedro (Verín, Ourense, Spain).

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